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25 February 1966

MEMORANDUM:

The National Elections Issue
In Vietnam From 1954 to 1960Summary

Although the Final Declaration of the 1954 Geneva Agreements called for the conduct of "general elections" throughout Vietnam in July 1956 in order to determine the "national will" on reunification of the country, such elections were never held. The failure to carry them out can be attributed both to the fact that the Hanoi regime almost certainly would not have permitted genuinely free elections to be held in the North, and to the fear of the Diem government in Saigon that it would be outvoted in the South by the Communists.

There is plentiful evidence that, whenever Communist interests in the North were at stake, Hanoi acted to impede and restrict the work of the International Control Commission set up to supervise the implementation of the Geneva agreements. It seems certain, therefore, that the commission would not have been able to intervene effectively to guarantee that the North Vietnamese populace could vote freely in a national election. Hanoi's position on the elections issue was also bolstered by the fact that Ho Chi Minh was a national hero who would probably have gained more votes in the South than any rival candidate.

Even while they were confidently pressing for national elections, the North Vietnamese were working covertly to subvert the government in South Vietnam. When their low-level subversion policy failed, the North Vietnamese ordered a full-scale guerrilla war in South Vietnam, and proceeded with the establishment of a new Communist front organization for the South. Hanoi subsequently dropped its proposals for national elections, and concentrated instead on demands for elections in the South. It insisted, however, that these elections should be held under the auspices of the Communist front for South Vietnam.

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1. From the outset, the government under Premier Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam refused to comply with North Vietnamese demands that the "preparatory consultations" on the general elections in Vietnam be held. According to the Geneva agreements, these consultations were to begin on 20 July 1955. Diem based his refusal in part on the implicit evidence that Hanoi would never allow the International Control Commission (ICC) set up for Vietnam under the Geneva Accords, to have a completely unrestricted hand in supervising and guaranteeing the freedom of voting in the North. Although North Vietnamese propaganda maintained that Hanoi was willing to go ahead with the elections under ICC supervision, there was plentiful evidence by mid-1955 that the North Vietnamese were impeding and restricting ICC activity whenever it threatened Communist interests.

2. In June of 1955, for example, Hanoi blocked the ICC attempts to inspect cargo brought ashore from ocean-going ships into Haiphong harbor.

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In late 1954, the Commission had requested permission to make an inspection survey of entry points along the border. Although Hanoi granted permission, it required the inspection team to travel to the area by motor vehicle and not by aircraft. In this manner it assured lengthy advance warning of the team's arrival at border transshipment points.

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3. Apart from the restrictions on the ICC, there was other evidence available to the Diem government indicating that the Communists in the North were intimidating and using force on the populace in a manner which would prevent them from voting as free men in any national election. The Hanoi regime, for example, had repeatedly violated Article 14 of the Geneva cease-fire agreement which guaranteed civilians the right to move freely from one zone to another until the repatriation of military forces in Vietnam was completed. There were numerous eyewitness accounts of roadblocks in the North set up against the movement to the South of both refugees and soldiers. Refugees were also barred frequently from transportation to the South and economic penalties were levied on many of those whose departure was approved.

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Hanoi's Outlook

4. From Hanoi's standpoint, there was everything to be gained in going ahead with the proposed national elections. Its own organs of control were strong enough to ensure that the overwhelming majority of the people in the North would vote as dictated by the Communists. While Hanoi would almost certainly have blocked the ICC from any true and effective supervision, it probably could, for propaganda purposes, have safely allowed the commission some token participation in overseeing the vote, just as it allowed the ICC to go through the motions in supervising the importation of bloc goods to the DRV. The fact that the population in North Vietnam totaled some three million more than in the South also contributed to Hanoi's confidence in pressing for elections, since it was assumed that any decision on unification would be based on a majority of the total vote.

5. The North Vietnamese position was also bolstered by the fact that in Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi had a national hero who would probably have gained more votes in South Vietnam than any rival candidate. Vietnamese in both the North and South considered Ho as the leader of the anti-French resistance movement. The Communists, moreover, represented the only well-organized national political force in Vietnam. Most of the other political elements in the South were squabbling bitterly among themselves and it seemed unlikely that they would be able to unite in opposition to the Communists.

Geneva Conference had hardly terminated before Hanoi had issued new strategy directives to Communist components in the South guiding them on how to take advantage of the situation and contribute to a Communist electoral victory in the South.

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instructed that Hanoi's strategy envisioned the "exact execution" of the Geneva Accords, no doubt because the Communists believed at the time that they could take over through the elections.

7. According to the document, all activity was to be directed at ensuring that the French and other Western elements left South Vietnam "within the next two years." The provincial committees were warned against putsch-type actions and told that "later on, when the Geneva Accord is on the point of fulfillment, we will fight more openly for more speedy fulfillment. We will gain nothing by being impatient or overbold." Each member of the party, said the document, "must be given a new responsibility applicable to the present situation." He should become "secretly the basic element" in some popular or governmental organization so as to be "ready for the fight" when the time is ripe for a Communist take-over. The document noted that, while the previous aim had been to "destroy" the governmental apparatus in South Vietnam, "until the general elections" it would be necessary to cooperate with the government, being careful to use it "for our own advantage." The document stressed the importance of confidence "in the party and President Ho Chi Minh."

8. The North Vietnamese also moved during the period 1954-56 to reorganize and strengthen the Communist party central apparatus in South Vietnam.

said, the party leaders in North Vietnam had set up a branch office in the South called the "Office of the Central Committee for South Vietnam" which was directed by several present-day members of Hanoi's politburo.

9. After the armistice in 1954, the authority of the branch central office in the South was strengthened to enable it to deal more effectively with the situation created by the political separation of North and South Vietnam. The Communist

-3-

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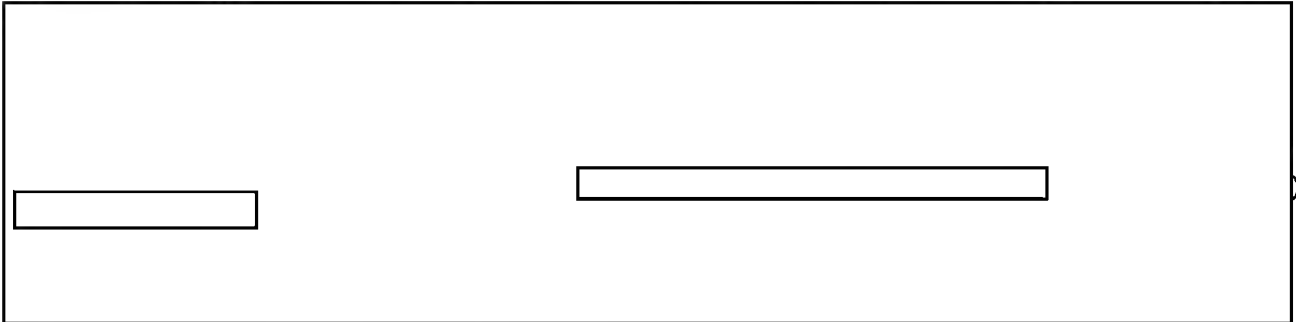
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apparatus in the South, however, still remained effectively under the over-all direction of Hanoi.

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10. It was clear that the party leaders in the South were still the hand-picked associates of those in the North. There is considerable evidence, for example, [redacted]

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[redacted] that the present party first secretary in Hanoi, Le Duan, was at the head of the party apparatus in the South from at least 1954 to 1956. He was first identified as a member of the party hierarchy in North Vietnam in late 1957.

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11. During this period, Hanoi tried repeatedly by both diplomatic and propaganda means to pressure the Diem government into holding the general elections. In August, 1955, the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry appealed to the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union as the Geneva co-chairmen to use their authority to bring about the elections. Moscow supported the North Vietnamese plea, but the United States backed Diem's stand that there was no prospect of free elections in North Vietnam. Secretary of State Dulles at a press conference on 30 August 1955 stated that "we certainly agree (with Diem) that conditions are not ripe for elections. We see no reason to oppose having elections if there can be produced conditions of genuine freedom."

12. During this period Diem was having some success in strengthening his government's position in South Vietnam. In October of 1955, Diem sponsored a referendum in the South on the question of whether the people preferred a republic under himself or a monarchy under Bao Dai. The results showed Diem a clear winner, and he then became president of the Republic of Vietnam.

-4-

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13. By 1956, Hanoi appears to have realized that the national elections could not be held as scheduled. The North Vietnamese apparently believed, however, that Diem's regime would fall eventually and that a government more amenable to Communist demands would take over. Thus, the North Vietnamese continued to carry the propaganda offensive to the South by publicly proposing a series of schemes during 1957 and 1958 which they claimed would lead to general elections. One such scheme called for an "early meeting" between northern and southern representatives to discuss a bilateral armed forces cut and a trade exchange between the two zones. Hanoi also offered to discuss the "free" movement of people across the demilitarized zone, as well as the free exchange of mail.

The Change in Hanoi's Strategy

14. Saigon's success by late 1958 in overcoming many of its difficulties and setting itself on a relatively stable and firm footing appears to have caused great distress in Hanoi. Le Duan is reported to have recommended to the politburo that a full-scale guerrilla war be instituted in the South to overcome the Diem government. Although it is not clear whether the politburo fully approved such a move at the time, it apparently did not decide on a step-up in terrorist action in the South. By mid-1959, Communist terrorist activities were posing a serious security problem in the provinces south of Saigon. In July alone there were 131 assassinations and 70 kidnappings of civilians. Some 351 other "clashes" with Communist guerrillas were reported, an increase of 80 over the previous month.

15. Hanoi also began the systematic training of military personnel for infiltration to South Vietnam in 1959. An infiltrator captured in Quang Nam Province in 1960 stated that he had begun his training in the North the preceding July, having been assigned to the duty from an infantry billet in the North Vietnamese regular army. He began his trek south in August of 1959.

16. During 1960, North Vietnamese leaders began to call publicly for the inauguration of full-scale insurgency in South Vietnam. Politburo member Nguyen Chi Thanh, for example, writing in the August

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issue of Hoc Tap, the official party journal in the North, put guerrilla warfare in the context of a Communist holy war. Extolling violence as a technique for achieving power in Vietnam, Thanh called specifically for the development of guerrilla forces in the South. Several prisoners of war have reported that Thanh is presently in the South directing the Communist insurgency. He has not appeared publicly in North Vietnam since late 1964.

17. The political aspects of the North Vietnamese plan to topple the Diem government were described in early September of 1960 at the North Vietnamese third party congress. Party secretary Le Duan called for a "broad united front" to be formed in the South. This front, he said, would be under the "leadership of the Marxist-Leninist party" in South Vietnam and would "unite" all the people against the government.

18. The Ho Chi Minh - led Communists in Indochina have persistently operated under the cover of a large "front" movement. In 1946, they formed the Lien Viet, or Vietnam United Front, to conceal Communist direction of the war against France. When the struggle shifted to South Vietnam following the Geneva agreements, the North Vietnamese organized the Vietnam Fatherland Front to garner support for the "reunification" of Vietnam. However, this organization, headquartered in North Vietnam, had little success in securing public backing in the South. It was with this situation in mind, apparently, that Le Duan called for a new front apparatus in 1960.

Establishment of a New Front

19. The abortive coup against the Diem regime in November 1960 provided the final impetus for the establishment of the new front. Reports indicate that the Communists believed a new mass organization was necessary in order to mobilize large numbers of people and take advantage of any future coup in Saigon. The insurgents in the South announced the establishment of the new "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam" (NFLSV) on 20 December 1960. To sustain the fiction that the NFLSV was the product of an indigenous band of patriots in the South, Hanoi itself gave no publicity to the new organization until January 1961.

-6-

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20. The hand of the North Vietnamese Communists, however, was clearly evident in the organization of the Front. The manifesto of the NFLSV was first aired in a Hanoi radio broadcast. The next time it was broadcast from Hanoi a few days later, the manifesto contained several significant changes. These changes appear to have eliminated material which the DRV, on second thought, believed would tend to undercut potential support for the Front in South Vietnam. Some passages which suggested Communist origin or ambitions were altered or deleted. The term "agrarian reform;" for example, was dropped. Vicious and bloody excesses had been carried out under this slogan in North Vietnam, and had caused widespread revulsion in the South.

21. In its final version, the manifesto bore a remarkable similarity to Le Duan's speech before the party congress in Hanoi, even using his words to describe some of the Front's aims. In establishing a series of broad, general objectives which could be accepted by the majority of people in South Vietnam, the manifesto followed the strategy the North Vietnamese Minister of Defense, Vo Nguyen Giap, set forth in his treatise on revolution in Vietnam, "People's War, People's Army," written in 1961.

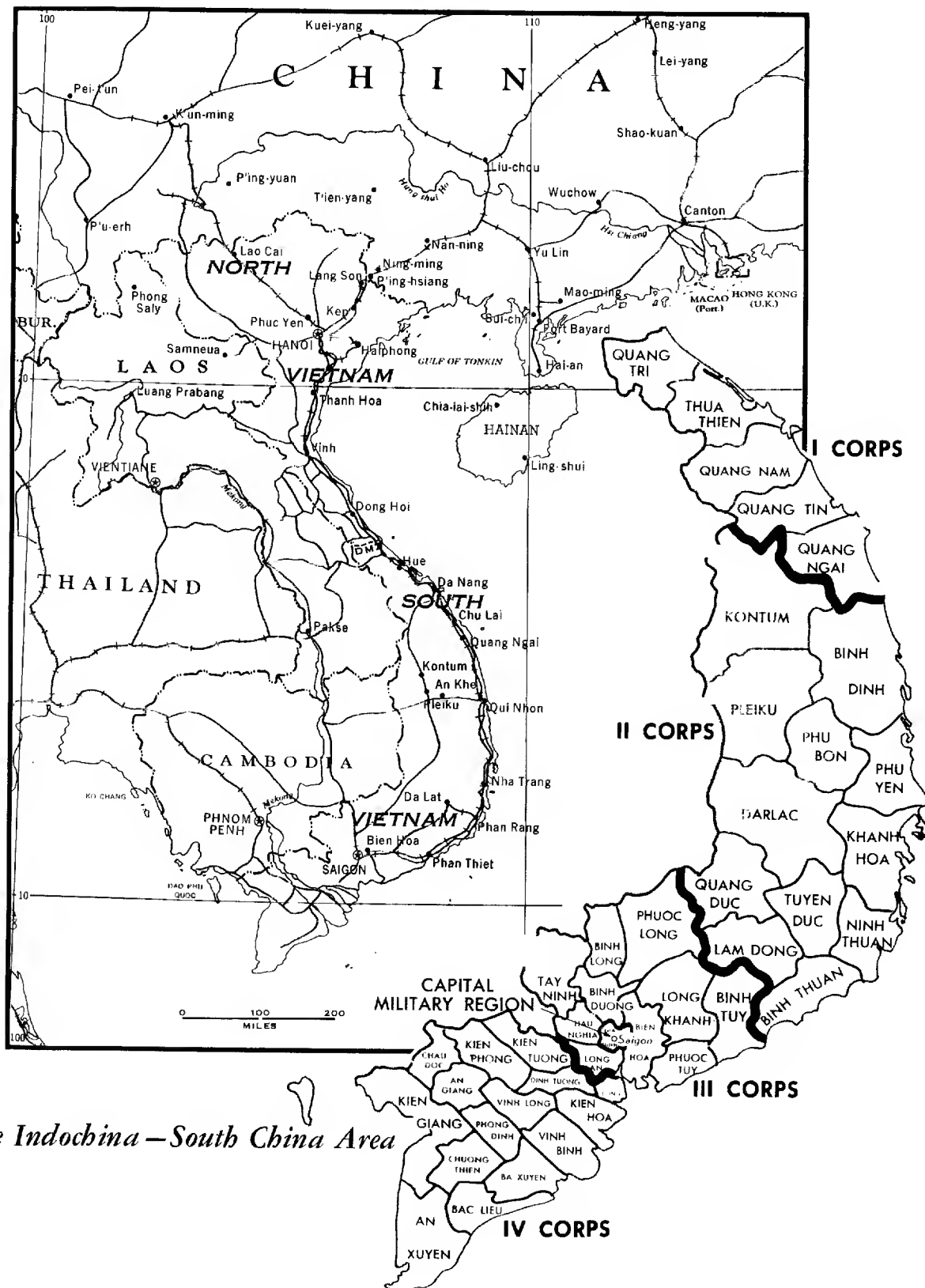
Subsequent Policy on Elections

22. After the formation of the NFLSV, North Vietnamese propaganda dropped its proposals for nationwide elections and, instead, began to concentrate on demands for free, general elections in South Vietnam alone. These demands were played cautiously, however, apparently because the Communists were no longer confident of victory if genuinely free elections were held.

23. The Liberation Front manifesto called for the "formation" of a "broad, national, democratic coalition government," to replace the Diem regime. Elections were only called for in regard to a new National Assembly in the South to be voted in through "universal suffrage." Both the Front and Hanoi have also made it clear since the NFLSV's formation that any "free" elections to be held in South Vietnam must be held under the auspices of the Front, and that the Front will not allow "foreign interference."

-7-

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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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